

# The local labour building the international community: Precarious work within humanitarian spaces

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## Abstract

Recent research has highlighted the relevance of spaces of international aid and development as sites where global politics materializes. However, the position of local aid workers within these spaces remains less explored. Drawing on fieldwork with humanitarian professionals employed in responses to the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan and Lebanon, this paper theorizes the salience of labour and precarity in the geographies of contemporary humanitarian aid. The ethnographically informed argument is built through three main points: (1) unemployment and insecurity among locally recruited humanitarian staff; (2) the forms of care and affective labour that the aid sector mobilizes; and (3) racialized and classed relations within humanitarian spaces. I argue that the differential precarities experienced by aid workers reproduce a porous and contested 'local vs international' divide. While challenged by the 'new inclusions' brought about by the global expansion of the aid industry, this divide perpetuates entrenched exclusions and hierarchies, raising ethico-political concerns about the presumptions of abstract universality inherent to humanitarianism.

## Keywords

Humanitarianism, precarity, labour, care, Middle East, Syrian refugee crisis

## Introduction

The aid 'industry' is a relevant actor in international politics not only for *what* it does, but also, increasingly, for *how* it does it. Humanitarian and development workers live,

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work and socialize in what Lisa Smirl (2015) has called ‘auxiliary space’. At the same time transnationally hyper-connected and physically well-demarcated, if not segregated (Apthorpe, 2011), this space develops and perpetuates itself through specific economic and social relations – from the market for domestic services targeting international staff to expatriate sociality that takes place within ‘aid compounds’ (Duffield, 2010). Since the early 2000s, humanitarian and development ‘auxiliary space’, and the economies associated with it, have undergone a dramatic global expansion (Duffield, 2012). As Heathershaw (2016: 92) notes, ‘the “international community” may or may not be building and developing the world, but it is constructing itself’ (see also Smirl, 2008, 2012).

The effects of this expansion are far from transitory. Duffield (2012: 476) highlights how this growth has been ‘widely felt in the Global South’, where the aid industry has become one of the main providers of paid employment for local populations. While we continue to know relatively little about the actual quantitative dimensions of this trend, Egeland et al. (2011) estimate that approximately 90% of the global workforce employed in the development and aid sector is locally recruited. Local aid workers, including refugees working for non-governmental and international organizations (NGOs and IOs) within camps and urban settlements, are increasingly in charge of implementing actual field operations and securing access to hard-to-reach areas (Farah, 2010; Malkin, 2015). As such, they are exposed to greater risks than expatriate staff, often for much lower salaries and poorer insurance conditions.

Yet existing research on development and aid professionals has mostly focused on those whom Arturo Escobar (2012: xvi) eloquently defined as ‘transnationalized middle-class experts’ – hyper-mobile expatriates occupying coordination and managerial positions. Significantly less attention has been paid to ‘subordinate development professionals’ (Heathershaw, 2016: 79), working in low-end or mid-range jobs, recruited with local contracts in the countries where field missions are located, and whose access to the transnational mobility associated with aid and development professions is significantly restricted. Beyond operationally oriented and clinical literature (Bennett and Erberts, 2015; Eriksson et al., 2013), few have looked at the forms of local labour the aid industry relies on for the implementation of its interventions, and ‘who’ local aid workers are, socially (the study by Corpus Ong and Combinido (2017) on local aid workers in the Philippines and the work by Fluri and Lehr (2017) on Afghanistan are two remarkable exceptions to this).

Drawing on fieldwork in Jordan and Lebanon, in this paper I explore the experiences of this largely ignored category of ‘humanitarian labourers’. I argue that the local–international divide within humanitarian aid labour, echoing colonial discourses and practices, leads to differential precarities for local aid professionals. My argument rests on a theoretical-methodological move focusing on the spatiality and materiality of humanitarian labour. Drawing on studies of labour and class in the contemporary Middle East, and on feminist and postcolonial geographies of care (Herrera, 2017; Khosravi, 2017; Raghuram, 2016; Sukarieh, 2016), I propose the precarity of labour as a salient lens through which to examine spatialized hierarchies among aid professionals. In so doing, I consider precarity as a socially and politically distributed condition associated with material and affective labour performed in conditions of (relative) uncertainty and subalternity, a condition that is deeply ingrained in the sociality and identity of the working subjects. This perspective is attuned to the politics of circulation ‘of bodies, of food, of sentiment, of disease, of material support’ within and around humanitarian spaces (Lopez et al., 2015: 2235). Rather than considering hierarchies among aid workers as the product

of the biopolitical contradictions embedded in the modern moral category of ‘humanity’ (Fassin, 2010), the paper posits the relationality, spatiality and materiality of locally recruited labour as essential for our understanding of ‘actually existing’ humanitarianism. As such, my approach is aligned with feminist methodologies that highlight the geopolitical relevance of the hidden and the understudied in the everyday, as experienced through the intimacy of bodies engaged in care and research work (Hiemstra, 2016; Moss and Donovan, 2017).

The next section of the paper outlines this theoretical and methodological approach by contextualizing within the ‘spatial-material’ and ‘everyday turns’ in critical development and humanitarian studies (Heathershaw, 2016; Jennings and Bøås, 2015). It then elucidates how the concept of the precarity of labour is applied in the study. The third section briefly discusses the role of humanitarian organizations in the economic landscape of Jordan and Lebanon and introduces the ethnographic fieldwork upon which the paper is based. The fourth section focuses on three intertwined dimensions of precarity as experienced by local aid workers in Jordan and Lebanon: (1) unemployment, temporary work contracts and insecurity; (2) the forms of immaterial and affective labour that the aid sector mobilizes; and (3) gendered, racialized and classed exclusions and hierarchies within humanitarian spaces. I thus explore the ways in which local staff encounter the humanitarian sector primarily through their subjectivity as workers, and their economic agency. Once recruited, they are often relegated to tasks that mobilize their ‘native’, subaltern knowledges and gendered emotional and affective capacities, while being exposed to spatial and material hierarchies, and even forms of everyday and cultural racism. In the conclusions I reflect on how the concepts of labour, care and precarity can contribute to a critical geography of humanitarianism.

## **Locating the precarity of humanitarian labour**

Historically, critiques of international development and aid have moved primarily from a postcolonial position (see, among others, Barnett, 2011; Kothari, 2005). Tracing the continuities between colonial forms of government and the ways in which humanitarian interventions seek to order the world, this body of work has shifted the focus of research from aid receivers to the humanitarian and development apparatuses themselves (Heathershaw, 2016). As Kothari (2005: 443) points out, since the 1980s such critiques have been primarily discursive, moved by ‘the desire to reveal the many embedded, tenacious strands of colonial forms of knowing and representing’ within humanitarianism and development’s longstanding ‘drive toward rendering people, places, and modes of circulation legible’. Within geography, this has resulted in critical work exposing the depoliticizing effects of aid and development, as well as, since the end of the Cold War, their growing centrality in visions of geopolitical and biopolitical security, in the policing of unwanted global circulations and in perpetuating forms of symbolic and material violence (Fluri and Lehr, 2017; Gregory, 2004; Lopez et al., 2015).

Following the ‘spatial and material turn’ in the social sciences, objects, spaces, infrastructures and practices of intervention have become important tools for identifying and delimiting the contours of an object of analysis, the international humanitarian community, which remains otherwise rather elusive (Heathershaw, 2016). The study of the people doing development and aid and their work has been another such important tool. Literature on ‘Aidland’ has scrutinized the everyday lives, biographical trajectories and motivations of aid professionals (Apthorpe, 2011; Fechter, 2012a, 2012b; Fechter and Hindmann, 2011).

Following the seminal work of Lisa Smirl (2012, 2015), other influential studies have theorized the condition of aid professional as ‘liminality’: ‘a community of people whose objects are their very selves and whose spaces are their own liminal, in-between sites’ (Heathershaw, 2016: 82; see also Duffield, 2010).

Although these writers carefully highlight how the boundaries of the international humanitarian community remain loose, and the latter encompasses both locals and global actors, empirical attention is mostly devoted to the transnationality of high-end aid professionals. Existing critical scholarship thus perpetuates a view of everyday life in humanitarian spaces as marked by hyper-mobility, securitized living and defensive architectures, ‘scattered’ and unstable – yet somehow glamorous and privileged – personal lives. Nevertheless, existing literature acknowledges how the work of transnational humanitarian professionals is also shaped by structural global conditions as they manifest locally in specific societies. For instance, Fechter and Hindmann (2011) highlight the growing precarization and casualization of development work. Duffield (2010) suggests that the ‘fortified aid compounds’ in which aid professionals increasingly live and work in post-interventionary societies reflect widespread patterns of urban segregation and ‘splintering’ in the Global South. More recently, contributions within the so-called ‘everyday turn’ point to the embeddedness of aid and development in small-scale political economies in which local actors play a central role (for an example related to peacekeeping, see Jennings and Bøås, 2015). Despite these important critical insights, however, the relevance of labour as an epistemic, heuristic and political category in the study of international aid remains undertheorized.

In this article, I address this gap by proposing the category of the precarity of labour as an analytical tool for moving beyond disembodied narratives of transnational liminality and exceptionality, tracing the spatialities of international humanitarianism as a localized, material-economic and embodied actor in postcolonial societies. I define precarity as resulting from experiences of work marked by uncertainty, insecure and diminishing material conditions, and (partially) unacknowledged performances of care and affective labour. While aware of the important existing discussions on the ontology of precariousness (Butler, 2009; see also, on the Middle East, Joronen, 2017), the scope of the paper is limited to labour-related conditions of precarity that are politically and socioeconomically produced and distributed through uneven geographies, affecting the bodies of some workers far more than those of others (Khosravi, 2017). In line with recent political ethnographies of labour, youth and marginality in the Global South, I consider such conditions as ‘inseparable from issues of subjectivity, affect, sociality, and desire’ (Millar, 2014: 35; see also Khosravi, 2017: 219–220; Lazzarato, 2004; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). The term precarity as employed in the article thus encompasses precarious work, but it also has implications well beyond the labour sphere.

The paper’s contribution in theorizing local precarious labour in humanitarian spaces rests on two interrelated elements. First, it brings to the fore the uneven and unstable politics of location that mark labour-related precarity within humanitarian spaces. In doing so, it grounds the discussion of the inequalities reproduced through the perpetuation of the ‘local vs international’ divide, which Fassin (2010) identifies as one of the main aporias of global humanitarianism, in the study of the spatialities of labour. To this end, as Neilson and Rossiter (2008) argue, precarity is a particularly apt concept. Far from being the exception to Fordism that prevailing narratives have depicted, precarity is ‘the norm that blurs the boundaries between capitalist production and reproduction’ (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008: 58). It is a condition to be found across geographical boundaries, and mobilizing a wide variety of embodied affects and practices that exceed – but are not disjoint from – the

domain of paid work. As such, the concept of precarity demands a ‘rethinking of the very notions we use to describe and analyse the current hierarchization and spatialization of labour, notions such as the international division of labour or the three worlds model of world geography (and its more contemporary binary elaborations, such as North/South)’ (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008: 58). The task is thus to focus on precarity’s capacity, as a fuzzy, contextual and materially grounded concept, to foreground the embodied struggles and spatialized hierarchies that characterize labour, beyond our implicit focus on the (post-) industrialized ‘North’. In this paper, this is done by highlighting how the distribution of precarious labour in the humanitarian sector contributes to making the boundaries of the so-called ‘international community’ porous and ever-shifting, without, however, making them disappear – to the contrary, often making them more resilient and entrenched.

Second, my analysis foregrounds care – as a labour form and social practice – as central to the definition of labour precarity within humanitarian spaces. Indeed, Neilson and Rossiter’s (2008) critique of the implicit spatialization embedded in theories of labour resonates with the postcolonial, ethico-political ‘dislocation’ of care advocated in recent feminist geographical writing (Raghuram, 2016; Raghuram et al., 2009). ‘Although care is fundamental to all our lives globally’, Raghuram (2016: 517) writes, ‘we lack reflections on what the actually-existing global variations of care imply for our ethico-political theorizing.’ Prevalent, Eurocentric narratives of humanitarianism as help to distant others that goes ‘from North to South’ (see Pallister-Wilkins, 2018) have obscured the localized forms of assistance, solidarity and labour that are essential to international interventions. As I argued elsewhere (Pascucci, 2017), refugee aid, particularly since the emergence of community-based approaches, often relies on local networks of sociality and mutuality in the provision of relief and assistance. As this article will show, local humanitarian staff are often recruited because of their ‘local knowledge’ and linguistic and cultural competence. Many are employed in field tasks where frequent contacts with aid beneficiaries require the constant mobilization and management of workers’ affective sphere and practices of care. Although essential to humanitarian assistance, these practices are partially unacknowledged, and often uninsured. Nevertheless, they tend to expand well beyond the boundaries of working life, even for the subjects who, like many of the people interviewed for this paper, approach the aid industry primarily as a provider of jobs. As such, they are an essential element contributing to the precarity experienced by local aid workers. In the following two sections I explore these experiences of precarious care labour ethnographically, discussing what their uneven spatialities may tell us about the ethics and politics of humanitarianism.

## **Researching the labour of aiding Syrian refugees**

Twenty-first-century Jordan and Lebanon are interesting sites for an exploration of precarious labour in the humanitarian sector. In 2016, the International Labour Organization (ILO) identified the Middle East as the geoeconomic region with the highest youth unemployment in the world (Dibeh et al., 2016). For both Jordan and Lebanon, Syria is just the last of a series of geopolitical, social and economic crises that have involved not only the reception and enduring encampment (Lebanon) or naturalization (Jordan) of Palestinian refugees, but also structural adjustment and neoliberal reforms. In both countries, precarity, as Neilson and Rossiter (2008) would have it, is not a novel, neoliberal exception. Although worsened by the economic policies implemented since the late 1980s, and often arbitrarily blamed on the high number of refugees from neighbouring countries, precarious labour has been a structural feature of Lebanese and Jordanian societies throughout the modern era (Chalcraft, 2007). Neoliberal restructuring inserted itself into a social fabric characterized by



sharp inequalities, oligarchies, urban segregation and informality, and sectarian and family-based 'social/geographical cleavages' (Fawaz, 2009: 848; see also Sukarieh, 2016). As Lenner and Turner (2018: 7) write in their study of the Jordanian labour market, local dynamics 'are caused by, but also have disrupted, different neoliberalizations'. Here, precarity has a broader social resonance that encompasses colonial dependency, local relations of patronage, urban informality, lack of welfare and political arbitrariness.

Since the Arab uprisings of 2011–2012, the two countries, alongside Turkey, have become important hubs for humanitarian assistance to Syrians displaced within the region, leading to a significant expansion of the local IGO/NGO sector. However, civil war and Palestinian displacement meant that international aid agencies established their presence in Lebanon well before the influx of Syrian refugees started in 2011. Similarly, the 2003 Iraq War and the associated mass displacement led to Jordan becoming an important centre for the coordination of international humanitarian responses. According to UNHCR registration data sources, as of 2017 Jordan hosted over 600,000 Syrians who had fled their home country because of the war (Lenner and Turner, 2018). In the same year, Syrian refugees in Lebanon numbered nearly one million (UNHCR, 2017). Coupled with the relative geopolitical stability they both enjoy, these figures have made the two countries the setting of choice for many NGOs' regional coordination offices. Little is known about the actual impact of the presence of aid agencies on local economies in Jordan and Lebanon. However, my ethnography suggests that the humanitarian sector's role as an economic actor and employer is perceived as increasingly relevant by local populations, reflecting a trend that is global in scale (Farah, 2010; Jennings and Bøås, 2015; Sukarieh, 2016). As in other middle-income countries across the region, the Syrian refugee crisis, often discussed in terms of its detrimental macroeconomic effects, has also 'spark(ed) development opportunities' (Zetter and Ruaudel, 2014: 8). The influx of refugees raised internal demand, which benefited 'large-scale agricultural producers, landlords, local traders, businesses and retailers, construction contractors', but also 'suppliers of goods and commodities to the humanitarian programme' (Zetter and Ruaudel, 2014: 8). Refugees and refugee aid thus benefited a local enterprising middle class threatened by increasing precarization – the class to which many of the people included in this study belonged, or aspired to belong.

Fieldwork for this paper was conducted in 2016–2017 in the context of a wider project on the economies and technologies of humanitarian responses to the Syrian crisis in the Middle East. Research has involved approximately four months of ethnographic observation with international NGOs in Beirut and the Bekaa (Lebanon) and Amman and Zarqa (Jordan). Potential participants were recruited by 'snowballing' through a set of diversified contacts: common friends, expatriate staff at international NGOs and academic colleagues at local universities whose former students had found work in the aid sector. Ethnographic methods included following one of the informants on one of her field trips in rural Lebanon, visiting community centres run by an international NGO that employed local field workers, and 'hanging out' with Jordanian aid workers during evenings and weekends, at bars, restaurants and social events. I also analysed blog entries written by local young professionals employed in the humanitarian and development sector in Jordan.

My ethnographic approach combined embodied presence and informal sociality in order to foreground the hidden and marginalized intimacies in the geopolitical and geoeconomic everyday – from alcohol consumption as a marker of cosmopolitan professional subjectivity, to anxieties about unemployment and deskilling (Fluri and Lehr, 2017; Hiemstra, 2016; Moss and Donovan, 2017; Walsh, 2007). A form of feminist 'periscoping' (Hiemstra, 2016), this methodology involved reflection on my positionality in relation to the hierarchies of mobility, class, gender and race that were central to my inquiry. As a Southern European

woman whose education and professional biography shared many aspects with those of the workers I spoke to (experiences of study abroad, periods of unemployment and precarious employment, work in and research on the aid sector, etc.), ethnography often allowed for the development of comradery, connection and friendships beyond my role as an outsider researcher. Geographies of privilege and precarity were often shifting in these encounters in the field. For instance, the relative privilege resulting from the mobility afforded by my European passport was in some cases outweighed by the class cleavage separating me from some of the Lebanese and Jordanian professionals I met, whose socioeconomic background was higher than mine.

Ethnographic observation was complemented by 16 in-depth interviews with locally recruited members of staff of local and international NGOs and other IOs. In-depth interviews were conducted in English, while ethnographic conversations took place both in English and Arabic – Arabic being the native language of all the participants. The people interviewed were all national hires: recruited and employed locally in their country of nationality and residence. Demographically, they were female and male university graduates in their early-twenties to mid-thirties, typically with a middle-class or lower middle-class background. Nearly all of the participants had degrees from local public universities. Three had studied at British and American secondary schools, attended private American higher education institutions in the Middle East like the American University in Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU), and had postgraduate degrees from European universities. The majority of the people met while conducting ethnography, as well as the people with whom I carried out in-depth interviews, were working for international NGOs. Some of these organizations were among the major operational partners of the UNCHR in the Middle East. At the time of the interview, one of the informants was working for an organization belonging to the UN system, while two of them had previous experiences at the UN, mostly as fieldworkers in refugee camps. Another respondent was employed by a small NGO she had co-founded, working in Lebanon but registered in the UK, while another was employed by a local NGO based in Amman, Jordan. All of the people included in the study, with the exception of four, were working in roles involving care and services requiring presence ‘in the field’. Only three were programme coordinators, and one a desk-based policy analyst. All of them but the latter, however, had started to work in the IO/NGO sector from the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ – that is, as field officers.

## **International community, local labour**

### *‘Fallen agencies’: unemployment, insecurity and the aid industry*

I really didn’t want to work for an NGO. But after spending a year at home, with nothing to do, I told myself: Great! You got a postgraduate degree to end up unemployed and sit at home watching TV!

Noor,<sup>1</sup> a woman in her early thirties from Amman, Jordan, drank her herbal tea and explained how, a couple of years earlier, she had resolved her unemployment crisis: putting her anti-imperialistic politics aside and accepting a job in an international NGO, in a programme addressing the Syrian humanitarian emergency. Noor’s description of the way she had surrendered to ‘the dull compulsion of economic relations’ (Marx, 1992, as quoted by Sukarieh, 2016: 1204) was marked by fierce cynicism towards the NGO world. A heightened sense of frustration ran through her accounts of her daily life at work,

particularly the experience of being subordinated to expatriate management, despite her qualifications and knowledge of the local context.

Similar experiences of ‘fallen agency’ (Chalcraft, 2007: 11) characterize the predicaments of many other Jordanians and Lebanese for whom, since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, jobs in the NGO sector have become one of the few available routes out of unemployment and financial instability. In 2016 in Beirut, it was not uncommon to hear university professors comment on how, thanks to the expansion of the humanitarian sector over the previous four years, finding qualified jobs had become easier for political and social sciences graduates than for young people holding MBAs or trained as software engineers. Like Noor, many of the workers interviewed had come to the aid sector after more or less protracted experiences of unemployment and underemployment. The following extracts from the interview with Qais, a 26-year-old working as a field assistant for a major IGO, show how, among graduates with urban middle-class backgrounds in Jordan, NGOs and IGOs are considered as even more attractive employers than the private sector.

Q. Was it difficult to find a job after you graduated?

A. It was really hard to find a job. I stayed at home for about 3 months after I finished university, I wanted to recover a bit, perhaps hang out with friends a little. Then I started to apply for jobs and all I could find were jobs like salesman . . . you work as a salesman for 250 JD per month. I worked for 2 days – 2 – for a company that sold batteries for remote controls. It was the worst job ever. (. . .)

Q. What kind of contract did you have in that job?

A. No contract . . . they give you a contract for a month, and they renew it if you meet the target. Otherwise they kick you out. At the IGO, at first I had a 3-month contract, then a 6 months one, then 9. Then fixed term for a year, and with a pension fund this time.

Q. What about the salary? Are they better in this sector?

A. Yes, salaries are higher than any other sector including the private one. You can make more money only if you have your own private business.

If he had to mention one reason why he would advise a friend to apply for a job in the sector, Qais concluded, ‘it would be the salary!’ While he considered his experience in this regard as largely positive, however, all of Qais’ contracts had so far been temporary. Most of the employment opportunities offered by humanitarian organizations in Jordan are temporary, reflecting the global trend towards casualization that affects both local and international staff (Fechter and Hindmann, 2011). Ameera, a recent graduate from the University of Jordan, approached me at the end of a training session in basic computer programming organized by an American NGO based in Amman. She was looking for advice on how to find a job in an international NGO or other ‘international companies’. She explained she had a humanities degree and was fluent in English and Spanish. Ameera had worked for some time for a UN office in Amman, as a field assistant. However, her contract had not been renewed due to the shift in US refugee and immigration policies that followed the election of Donald Trump to the White House, which had led to the indefinite suspension of the programme she had been working in. Jobless since then, Ameera was worried about deskilling. ‘I am forgetting my English and my Spanish due to lack of practice. I have tried to apply for other jobs’, she complained, ‘but the outcome is always an email starting with “we regret to inform you”.’

Work and money can be uncertain also for graduates who found their own NGO. Georgina, a Lebanese woman in her mid-twenties, was precariously employed by a small NGO that she had contributed to founding. She described NGO work – she spent over half



of her time in the field, both in Beirut and in the Bekaa – as extremely rewarding, and reiterated her ethical commitment to it. However, she also said it was demanding, financially unstable and unsustainable in the long run: ‘It is not something I can continue to do once I start a family.’ Georgina was interested in research, and had a desire for a more intellectually satisfying and prestigious job.

For most of the workers interviewed, the first contact they had ever had with the aid and development sector was the outcome of a job search. They approached the humanitarian sector primarily as an economic actor and an employer (see Fluri and Lehr, 2017). In their perceptions and those of their families, as economic restructuring made graduate jobs particularly difficult to come by, humanitarian and development agencies had replaced state bureaucracies as providers of sufficiently secure, fairly prestigious jobs that allow them to preserve their middle-class status. Yet the pathway to stable work offered by the sector was anything but smooth and straightforward. While employment in NGOs and IGOs had been for many a way to break a pattern of protracted unemployment, uncertainty prevailed. The sector was perceived as inherently precarious, with job opportunities linked to rather volatile emergency situations, as shown by the case of Ameera. Sukarieh (2016: 1221) has argued that the incorporation of Middle Eastern urban working and lower middle classes, jobless graduates and otherwise marginalized youth in development programmes, both as beneficiaries and as workers, does not erase ‘their continuous exclusion from economic life’ (see also Elyachar, 2005). The middle-class workers examined in this paper can be regarded as examples of ‘partial inclusion’, rather than exclusion. Nevertheless, the actual tasks for which local staff are employed share many of the characteristics that have been identified as constitutive of precarious work, particularly the prevalence of care and emotional labour. As the next section will show, even for those who cynically claimed to be working ‘for the salary’, these tasks required a degree of personal and ethical investment that influenced the local politics of humanitarian intervention.

### *Precarious care*

The first anecdote Qais recalled when I asked him what he found most difficult about his job was his awkward encounter with an 85-year-old beneficiary. As part of the programme he was working as a field assistant in, he had to travel to Erbil and escort the elderly Kurdish Iraqi woman on her trip to Amman, where she would be reunited with her family before being resettled with them in the United States. It was Qais’ first international mission, and he remembered being initially rather excited and curious about travelling to Iraq. Pretty soon, however, Qais realized that he could not deliver what was expected from him in that operation, namely providing company, support and care to the client. The woman spoke mostly Kurdish, and communication in the little Arabic she knew was uncomfortable. Stressed about her first long trip away from home and air travel, she was in need of reassurance, not to mention assistance with tasks like going to the toilet and changing clothes. The slight embarrassment with which Qais recalled the episode is akin to that commonly experienced by workers in the nursing and care sectors doing what has been defined as ‘body work’ (McDowell and Dyson, 2011: 2197; see also Twigg et al., 2011). Although his job description did not involve touch and actual ‘paid work on the bodies of others’ (Twigg et al., 2011: 171), in the case of the elderly Iraqi woman expectations of care were real, and involved both emotional and physical aspects.

Buthaina, a business graduate in her mid-twenties, had been working in the aid sector for three years when we met, and was currently employed by a major international NGO. After completing her degree in business and a short, very precarious experience in the sales and

marketing department of a private company, she had found her first job in the aid sector, as a UN field assistant in the Za'atari camp. Like many of the Jordanian workers in the camp, she used to commute from Amman every day – over an hour by car. Buthaina's job in Za'atari consisted mainly of visiting Syrian families at their shelters to check on their conditions and needs. She was part of a team of 16 employees, all Jordanians. Buthaina described her field assistant job as extremely demanding. In addition to listening to vulnerable people expressing their anger and distress for several hours each day, the job involved a number of physically taxing tasks. For instance, after reaching the camp in the morning, her team had to walk for over half an hour from the base camp, where the IGO offices were located, to the actual field, where their Syrian clients lived.

[We had to walk] every single day, also in the summer, under the sun. At some point we complained, and then we got the car. Before, when we used to walk, we would need to sit down and have some rest once we reached the refugees' shelters, inside their caravans. At the higher levels [of the IGO], they didn't know what we were doing, how tiring it was.

For a while, her team had also been in charge of water delivery in the camp, a task that Buthaina described as encompassing all the most burdensome aspects of the job, from clients voicing frustration over their unmet needs (water provisions were limited, and their distribution contested), to physically tiring procedures and unavailable and unhelpful management, both locally recruited and international. All IGOs have field specialists, however, as Buthaina explained:

[International recruits] are supposed to know the field, but they don't. They rely entirely on locally recruited field assistants, like me. We acted responsibly as to water delivery, we tried to ... but they [field specialists] never went there, never saw it.

Yasmine, a Lebanese professional in her early thirties, educated in France and the United States, recalled her experience as a monitoring and evaluation officer in a programme run by a major international NGO in the Bekaa as marked by constant physical proximity not only to final beneficiaries, namely Syrian refugees, but also to locally recruited staff employed in catering and construction, as well as to local contractors and residents. Although she had been dispatched from Beirut, where she had grown up and got her first degree, as a Lebanese she was among the few members of staff to be based in Zahle, in the Bekaa, an area of the country often precluded to international staff due to insurance and risk assessment procedures. During her time working there, Yasmine felt that what was expected from her was a form of embodied knowledge encompassing language skills and familiarity with local sectarian and security arrangements. In a country where international humanitarian organizations face major challenges in coordinating with local institutions (Boustani et al., 2016), her intimate knowledge of the local context was essential to the day-to-day implementation of the programme she was in charge of. Yet it remained largely unacknowledged. Her experience resonates with that of aid workers of refugee heritage located at 'multiple nodes of identity' and mobilizing different positionalities in their work (Malkin, 2015: 57). Yasmine also recalled receiving more or less explicit threats, for instance, from local contractors who thought she had the power to influence tender processes.

I heard also from other colleagues of mine, from different organizations ... being physically assaulted, because for some reason, you know, someone thought that they influenced decisions

on who ... who gets what tender. ... People think, you know, that all these organizations are here to steal our money anyway.

Aid work, Fechter (2012a: 1391) has noted, can be 'an all-encompassing endeavor, constantly seeping into practitioners' personal and social lives'. In the case of locally recruited staff employed in response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan and Lebanon, however, the pervasive nature of the job has to do less with extra hours at the office, uprooted transnational lives and expectations of networking and work-related expatriate sociality, and more with the materiality and physicality of care work. In social work, physical proximity, use of the body and work on other bodies have been theorized as filling the gap between policy planning and implementation (Twigg et al., 2011). In a similar vein, local hires assisting refugees in humanitarian programmes in Jordan and Lebanon mediate and mitigate the messiness and unpredictability of aid work (Dunn, 2012) through their bodies and presence. Even when apparently immaterial, such as in the case of Buthaina and her team of field assistants paying visits and listening to encamped Syrian families in distress, emotional work carried out by local staff involves bodily perceptions, activities and fatigue. For Yasmine, being perceived as a mediator between local communities and international non-governmental organizations, particularly in the context of the specific micro-economies the aid industry engenders, was about 'being there', physically, with risks materializing through threats to her bodily integrity.

These narratives show how precarity can result from particularly mundane material relations. As Smirl (2015) has argued, the materiality of objects shape global humanitarianism at least as much as carefully researched policy formulations. It was access to an outwardly unremarkable and ordinary means of transportation such as a car that allowed Buthaina and her team to rearrange their working days and significantly decrease stress. On a symbolic level, the car had decreased the distance in both level of comfort and closeness to the field separating Buthaina's team from managerial and international staff, bringing some balance into a rather unequal division of labour.

Hierarchies and distance between local and international staff, however, are far from univocal and straightforward. The relation between Buthaina's team and expatriate management was mediated by a locally recruited supervisor. Class, with its corollary of access to education, urban lifestyles and local and international mobility, was a powerful element separating an evaluation officer like Yasmine, although locally recruited, from the local contractors, restaurant owners and construction workers benefiting, or trying to benefit, from local humanitarian micro-economies. The next section further explores these different variations of 'locality' among Jordanian and Lebanese staff, by looking at the materialities and spatialities through which they are experienced within humanitarian environments.

### *Racialized and classed hierarchies: precarities along the local vs international divide*

You come to Amman and then willingly or unwillingly (it doesn't matter actually) start to gentrify its neighbourhoods (...) (talk about 1st Circle and Al Weibdeh as prototypes). You stroll around, hop from one place to another, and your main language of communication is? English of course, even if it is not your mother tongue. Why learn Arabic? We all like to flex our muscles and show you how 'educated' we are, and of course show you how much we detest our own language because it is not cool enough.

‘Will Someone Kill Me Please?’ (WSKMP), from which the quote above is extracted, is a blog launched in early 2017 by young Jordanian graduates gravitating around the local aid industry. Many of its sharply sarcastic entries, inspired by contacts with the world of aid and development, are devoted to voicing the frustration arising from expatriate–local and class relations. The quote above refers to expatriates’ role in promoting urban spatial segregation in Amman – a city that is sharply divided between an affluent ‘West’ and an impoverished East, where many neighbourhoods were built in the 1950s and 1960s as Palestinian refugee camps. Significantly, however, the blog identifies ‘aspiring’ local urban middle classes, their consumption patterns and their eagerness to communicate in English as contributing to the city’s segregation.

The quote provides a good introduction to the complex and multilayered character of expatriate–local relations in the aid sector. Syrian refugees, transnational humanitarian managers, locally recruited coordinators, field assistants, contractors and case workers are far from socially and culturally homogeneous groups, and the boundaries separating and uniting them are far from straightforward. In some of the cases examined for this paper, local and international aid workers shared the same educational trajectories – for instance, they both held degrees from European and US universities. In others, they used the same infrastructures in their daily work, from office spaces to, in the case of Jordan, private transportation provided by their employers to transfer staff from Amman to the Syrian refugee camps located in other regions in the country. As already remarked, configurations of class and mobility were often shifting in my fieldwork. In Jordan, national legislation imposes tight restrictions to the employment of migrant labour. Thus, in 2017, some European and North American expatriates working in the NGO sector were also precariously employed: they were hired through external consultancy contracts, leading to partially limited visa and mobility statuses. On the other hand, while some of the local humanitarian staff I met, like Qais, had never travelled abroad before finding employment in the sector, others were mobile and enjoyed relatively easy transnational lives, either because they were holders of a second, ‘Western’ passport, or because they came from well-off families whose property assets made it easy to obtain visas.

Finally, NGOs and IGOs working on refugee aid and development in Jordan and Lebanon are surely different from the peacekeeping, post-conflict and post-disaster interventions analysed in recent literature on the geopolitics and intimate economies of aid (see, among others, Fluri and Lehr, 2017). Jordan and Lebanon are two middle-income countries and, despite Lebanon’s recent wars, they are not affected by the sheer infrastructural and socioeconomic instability that characterizes post-conflict societies. Although episodes like the threats described by the Lebanese worker quoted in the previous section are not uncommon, the contextual reality of the two countries makes the relations between the local and the international aid community less hierarchical and more nuanced.

For many of the workers interviewed, however, the complexity of these structural conditions did not erase the perception of being subordinate to international staff, underemployed and relegated to the most repetitive and yet demanding tasks, while ‘ultimate decision making power still lay with the management’, particularly with international managers (Malkin, 2015: 56). Even when different categories of workers shared the same premises, meaningful contacts between internationals and locals were rare, as highlighted by Qais:

There is not much contact between internationals and locals, really. In our organization, all internationals are higher up ... they have managerial positions and do not interact with local staff ... with those who are below ... In the canteen, in our office, for example, or during the

coffee break, you always find two groups, internationals on one side, and the locals on the other, just talk among themselves. If a local talks to an international or try to become his friends, everybody says: see, he's trying to climb the career ladder ... he's trying to build *wasta* [clientelistic networks, in Arabic].

Qais colleagues' scepticism towards the possibility of building relations across the expatriate–local divide beyond career-related networking is echoed in many of the narratives examined. Indeed, experiences of racism, in its everyday forms spanning colonial paternalism and islamophobia, is common in the narrative of local aid workers (Sukarieh, 2016). Some of the people interviewed qualified what they had been subject to in the workplace as seemingly benign, commonsensical 'cultural racism', and identified its most common manifestations in comments on inefficient local bureaucracies, the 'backwardness' of local officers, local marriage traditions such as 'baroque wedding parties', and prejudices on Arab women workers' capacity for strategically planning and advancing their careers, taking decisions autonomously from their families. However, these separations and inequalities are always experiential, nuanced and articulated contextually through the materialities and spatialities of class. As some of the Jordanian workers remarked, looking and sounding 'like a Westernized person from West Amman' meant having access to better networking, hence career opportunities. Some of them commented on international colleagues and managers identifying a certain English accent as a mark of having attended local state schools, and thus being 'poor and backward'. As a middle-range Lebanese humanitarian manager put it, commenting on his relatively privileged educational background in English and American secondary schools and universities, 'you have the ones who are really local. I am local, but not so local.'

Paradoxically, in international organizations officially inspired by the promotion of ideals such as humanity and universality, being a practising Muslim was also described as a factor limiting career prospects. Interestingly, the prohibition of alcohol consumption was one of the biggest obstacles in this regard. Qais remarked how, even if Muslim, he had no problems with occasionally consuming alcoholic beverages, which meant he was in a better position to build relations with his international colleagues and bosses, for instance, by attending private receptions and dinner parties. 'If you are a practising Muslim, then it is more difficult to socialize', he concluded. Buthaina and a colleague of hers confirmed this point, commenting that 'alcohol builds relations ... it makes you build relations'. 'For instance', explained Buthaina, 'you can bring them [expatriate managers and colleagues] alcohol if you happen to travel abroad, 'cause here it's insanely expensive'. While the role of alcohol in expatriate sociality has been explored (Walsh, 2007), these narratives reveal how the substance can act as an important mediator in humanitarian spaces marked by different degrees of 'locality', everyday racism and spatialized class relations. In the aid industry, alcohol can become one of the many infrastructures that make 'abstract universals into lived inequalities' (Donovan, 2015: 733)

## Conclusions

Humanitarianism as an international and transnational enterprise traditionally defines itself in relation to its local 'beneficiaries'. Arjun Appadurai's (1996) classic observation that transnational subjects and practices are fundamentally involved in the 'production of locality' has had significant influence on critical approaches to the global aid industry. Nevertheless, Heathershaw (2016) suggests that, as the international humanitarian community expands, it should be understood more in terms of its inclusions than its exclusions –



from emerging economies affirming themselves as donors to the individuals that occupy various new professional positions within such a community.

The analysis of local labour in the aid industry presented in this article has showed how these inclusions, although existing and having perceivable effects, are based on, and contribute to perpetuating, a differential distribution of precarity. The narratives of young Middle Eastern aid workers examined shed light on a 'division of development and aid labour' that disproportionally puts the burden of unstable, physically and emotionally demanding, and scarcely prestigious, work on them. These uneven geographies of labour precarity pervade everyday life in the sector, even when internationals and nationals share similar salary and contractual conditions, or when local hires do succeed in climbing the career ladder. In a global humanitarian sector marked by growing securitization and 'bunkerization' (Duffield, 2010), local staff are 'actually there' in the field, and, despite much hype around remote, cyber and technological humanitarianism (for a critical review on the topic, see Sandvik et al., 2015), their capacity to be physically present – because they are culturally and linguistically competent, but also differentially insured, or non-insured – is central to the implementation of humanitarian policies.

Here, humanitarianism is an embodied, material and spatialized assemblage that both feeds into and is shaped by broader, contextual socioeconomic relations. The narratives examined in the paper are symptomatic of the uncertain status of increasingly precarious Arab urban middle classes. For them, the aid industry represents often the most appealing source of qualified employment, if not the only one. However, precisely because of humanitarianism's nature as a localized and spatialized assemblage, the local vs international/transnational divide intersects with many other cleavages, making it shifting and porous. As the previous section of the paper showed, entrenched hierarchies of class and race (or racialized religion) are found among local aid workers themselves – as remarked by one of the Lebanese aid workers, it is class that determines how 'local' you actually are. In this regard, although some of them did worry about their own and their family members' financial situation, or felt discriminated against because of being Muslims, the middle-class subjects included in the study were relatively privileged. Many other categories of workers, often from a lower socioeconomic background, are also part of, or gravitate around, the international humanitarian community. Caterers, cooks, cleaners, construction workers, baby sitters, sex workers, although mentioned briefly in some cases, were not included in this study. While existing critical development and aid scholarship is starting to pay attention to them (Jennings and Bøås, 2015), much remains to be explored about the localized economic geographies and political economies of aid in which they are positioned.

When applied to the postcolonial world, the terms 'precarious', 'precarity' and even more so 'precariat' present a number of problematic connotations, particularly in their potential for reinforcing problematic distinctions between 'formal' and 'informal' economic spheres (Munck, 2013). By focusing on one aspect of the often hidden economies associated with humanitarianism, this article can be regarded as contributing to a critique of this division. The forms of 'care work' performed by local staff are particularly important in this regard, as they illuminate how the humanitarian sector mobilizes practices that are embedded in social and cultural relations beyond the productive sphere, encompassing gendered embodiment and Arab and Muslim solidarities – as in the case of the Arabic-speaking, Jordanian workers visiting refugees at home in Za'atari camp. While some writers would argue that the 'real subsumption' of these practices into the productive sphere is precisely what characterizes contemporary 'precarious labour' (Hardt and Negri, 2009; see also Anderson, 2012), many other dynamics associated with refugee aid as a biopolitical endeavour are at play in this context (Pascucci, 2017). Moreover, while 'precarious labour' is a category historically

associated with explicitly articulated political subjectivities (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008), things are significantly more nuanced in the professionalized humanitarian sector. To be sure, for people like Noor, with whom I started this paper, their dissatisfaction and cynicism towards the aid industry had a political dimension, encompassing both class grievances and anti-imperialistic sentiments. However, explicit instances of resistance to aid and development, like those found by Sukarieh (2016) in her study of microcredit and entrepreneurship programmes in Jordan, were not present in the narratives collected. The middle-class background and generally high level of education of the participants meant that, overall, they benefited from the aid industry more than they felt oppressed by it.

Nevertheless, more research is needed on the political subjectivities that emerge as humanitarian aid increasingly becomes something people from the Global South provide to other people from and within the Global South. Traditional, Eurocentric views of global humanitarianism have ascribed idealism and altruistic motivations only to international staff, with local contractors and workers in countries of intervention merely providing labour (Fassin, 2010; see also Fechter, 2012b). The Jordanian and Lebanese graduates met while conducting research for this paper also had an instrumental view of the sector, which they approached primarily as a provider of jobs. However, their physical and affective presence in spaces of refugee aid, as emerging from the ethnographic material examined, is likely to have effects that should be further investigated, particularly when contrasted with the deterritorialized, technocratic management of 'international' humanitarians. Can the precarious care labour of local workers be the basis for an ethics of global aid that questions the contradictions of abstract universalism? If we are to bring a meaningful, affirmative contribution to debates on humanitarian politics and policies, we need to bring this question to bear on the critical scholarship that has highlighted the inherently unstable and contextual nature of a humanitarian enterprise where 'multiple visions of humanity are at stake' (Lopez et al., 2015: 2235). As Nancy Folbre's (2014) work has shown, making care work visible is essential in determining the rationale for economic, social and political change (see also Vaittinen, 2015). Precarious care labour allows for building alliances across a wide range of social actors, while at the same time mobilizing different identities and positionalities within the single 'caring' subject. It is thus imperative that we consider the uneven geographies of a sector that fails to acknowledge and insure the intellectual, physical and affective labour of most of its workers, and become attentive to the ethico-political values and struggles that local professionals bring into an otherwise remote – and at times irrelevant – 'international community'.

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